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Project Self-Esteem: Some Effects of an Elementary School Black Studies Program[1]

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It has been well-accepted that many Black Americans suffer from a negative self-image (e.g., Clark, 1965). The historical roots of such attitudes in the heritage of slavery and the incorporation of racist stereotypes have frequently been described. Poussaint (1966), for example, has noted that, "today there is abundant evidence that racism has left almost irreparable scars on the psyche of Afro-Americans that burdens them with an unrelenting, painful anxiety that reaches out for a sense of identity and self-esteem."

Until the recent "black consciousness" movement there has been virtually no consistent social force aimed at neutralizing such deleterious effects of racism. This report presents some results of a project, Project Self-Esteem, whose goal it was to develop "black consciousness" in black elementary school children. The factors which led to the development of this project have been previously described elsewhere (Golin, Davis, Zuckerman, & Harrison, 1970). Briefly, Project Self-Esteem originated in 1966 in the black community out of the concern of black parents and teachers for the lack of exposure of their children through formal, institutionalized procedures to "Black History". Through the cooperation of faculty members of the University of Pittsburgh and members of the community a program involving the teaching of programs of Black art, dance, and music were, with the cooperation of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, begun in the Fall of 1968.

The project was designed to investigate two major questions. The first was the demonstration aspect of the project, that is, to determine if there was sufficient interest to mobilize community resources in support of such a project. As indicated in an earlier report (Golin et. al., 1970) it has been clear that the project has enjoyed wide support from both within and outside the black community and has been successful from that point of view. The second question concerned the effect on the children who participated in the project. It was hypothesized that participation in the project would have a salutary effect on the emotional well-being of the children. This paper presents a report of some effects of the project on the mental health of the participating children.

Method

Subjects

Approximately 200 children enrolled in the fifth grade in three predominantly black schools in Pittsburgh participated in the project. Two of the schools were drawn from Pittsburgh's Hill District, a ghettoized community, while the third was drawn from a comparable community in another part of the city. The children in these three schools constituted the Project group; approximately 200 fifth grade black children from three comparable elementary schools were selected as a Control group to provide a basis for comparison with the Project group.

Procedure

Children in the Project Group participated in three intensive programs. These were: 1) School Classes - Three classes per week in Black art, music, and dance were conducted as part of the regular school cur-

riculum. These classes involved the development of "black consciousness" themes in art, music, and dance classes. The project teachers were individuals who were selected with regard to their having personal attributes of "black consciousness" as well as competance in their particular field. 2) After School Program - The after school program involved special art, music, and dance programs. Project children, for example, participated in programs of African and Afro-American dance and music which were presented at the Annual Pittsburgh Folk Festival. 3) Field Trip Program - Project children took field trips approximately once every other month to places of business and exhibitions of Black art, music and dance where they met with some of the black artists involved.

Children in the Project group participated in the programs through the fifth and sixth grades. Control group children did not participate in any of the programs. Before the programs were begun Project and Control groups were given a pretest measure of emotional adjustment, the Group Personality Projective Test (GPPT) (Cassel & Kahn, 1961). This test was again administered (posttest) at the end of the project, 17 months later. The GPPT consists of 90 stick figure drawings; five multiple choice items for each picture describe possible interpretations of the events depicted and S is instructed to choose, in the usual manner, one of the five choices. One of the major scales of the GPPT, the Tension Reduction Quotient (TRQ), assesses the relative proportion of negative feelings projected by S and is considered a measure of the degree of anxiety tension present. The test-retest reliability of this scale is reported to be .78 among unselected high school students (Cassel &

Kahn, 1961).

The GPPT was administered by black college student members of the University of Pittsburgh Black Action Society who received special training in objective test administration. Group administration of the test was employed in which all GPPT test items were read aloud by the testers to the Ss.

Results and Discussion

Two hundred and twenty-six Ss completed both the pretest and posttest GPPT. Of these, 130 were in the Project group (62 males and 68 females) and 96 in the Control group (56 males and 40 females).

In order to test the hypothesis that participation in the project would have a salutary effect on the mental health of the children an analysis of variance of TRQ scores was carried out. This analysis compared Project and Control groups on their pretest and posttest scores as well as with regard to initial (pretest) TRQ level (High versus Low TRQ). The data for male and female Ss were analyzed separately. Table 1 shows the summary of results for male Ss in which a significant Project-Control group x Pretest-Posttest interaction can be seen. The Pretest-Posttest means and SDs are presented in Table 2 which shows that there were no reliable differences between the Project and Control groups on the pretest and a significant decrease from pretest to posttest on the part of the Project group only. Table 2 also shows T-scores drawn from the GPPT normative data (Cassel & Kahn, 1961). The T-scores show that the means of both male groups were approximately 1.5 σ above the mean at pretest; since high scores on this scale are indicative of poor mental health, the decrease on the part of the Project group can be considered as reflecting decreased tension among this group and

increased mental health. This result, therefore, supported the hypothesis that participation in the project would have a salutary effect on the mental health of the children.

The TRQ analysis was also carried out for female Ss. Here, no significant differences between the Project and Control groups were found. As can be seen in Table 2 female Ss were significantly lower on pretest scores than male Ss ($z = 2.84$; $p < .01$). The relatively high mean TRQ score of the males can be considered as consistent with the view that black males may be particularly vulnerable (Poussaint, 1966).

The question might be raised as to whether the improvement noted on the part of male Project children was, in fact, related to the content of the programs, per se, or whether a "placebo effect" occurred. It could be maintained, for example, that any program, providing increased attention might have produced such effects. Such a possibility cannot be ruled out on the basis of the present data. In recorded interviews, however, the children reported an absence of previous discomfort over being called black and increased self-acceptance. Such qualitative findings lend considerable support to the interpretation that the improvement on the part of Project children was related to the content of the programs.

In summary, this study indicated that programs designed to develop "black consciousness" in elementary school children can have a salutary effect on the mental health of the male participants.

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Table 1

Summary of the Analysis of Variance of Male TRQ Scores

Source	df	MS	F	p
Between Ss	117			
Project-Control (B)	1	820.49	3.86	
High-Low TRQ (C)	1	14527.21	68.37	<.001
B x C	1	79.21	<1	
error (b)	114	212.48		
Within Ss	118			
Pretest-Posttest (A)	1	286.88	3.05	
A x C	1	3792.02	40.30	<.001
A x B	1	511.44	5.44	<.02
A x B x C	1	65.21	<1	
error (w)	114	94.09		
Total	235			

Table 2

TRQ Means and SDs of Project and Control Groups

	Pretest		Posttest	
	Project	Control	Project	Control
Males				
Mean	45.74	46.54	40.73	47.23
SD	15.32	14.70	16.02	13.75
Females				
Mean	40.61	39.49	39.48	42.14
SD	15.84	16.62	14.40	20.01

T Scores: $T_{50} = 23$; $T_{60} = 34$; $T_{70} = 48$

Footnote

1. This study was supported by Grant MH 14366 from the National Institute of Mental Health.